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God and Privacy

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GOD AND PRIVACY

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Contemporary reflection about God which includes certain assumptions raises for us the issue of God and privacy. Some philosophers believe that there is an obligation to respect privacy grounded in our basic moral duty to respect the autonomous choices of persons. If this is correct, and if it is correct to think of God as one whose actions perfectly accord with moral duties, then there is a *prima facie* case for thinking that God respects our privacy. We explore this thesis by considering the most plausible objections to it, including matters of religious practice.

The issue of God and privacy arises from consideration of the contemporary theistic conception of God as an all-powerful but "self-limiting" being who chose to bring into being creatures with a significant freedom, a libertarian freedom which creatures use to shape in part their destinies as they struggle with the perils of moral choice. The virtue of this position is that it recognizes that a God who creates significantly free choice and always allows its exercise limits divine power. Since libertarian choice cannot both be free and determined, a God who always values autonomous choice will not use divine power to override it. Some philosophers have placed logical limits on the scope of divine omniscience as well; they have argued for such limits in the case of the possible and future contingents.[1] But it is assumed by all that God necessarily knows all truths about the past and present. In this essay we argue that if God so values human freedom, then a very strong case can be made that God also chooses to limit divine knowledge in a way that respects privacy. That is, though God's knowledge of what is true could include every innermost thought and feeling of each of us, God chooses instead to grant humans the choice of self-disclosure.

Our argument to this effect employs a certain analysis of the value of respect for privacy among humans and maintains that this value tells us something about divine respect for privacy. In making this move from human relationships to the divine-human relationship we make two assumptions typically, but not uncontroversially, shared by those who maintain that God is self-limiting and humans free. The first assumption is that God desires and commands that we use our freedom to develop good moral character and to cultivate relationships of love and trust with others and with God.[2] The second assumption—presently more subject to debate—is that a proper explication

of divine goodness includes reference to that which is morally good.[3] That is, reflection on principles which morally bind human conduct legitimately serves as a guide to the character of divine action, either because God shares the duties which these principles detail[4] or because these principles specify the moral value freely and unobligedly actualized out of divine benevolence.

1

We begin our exploration of God and privacy with an account of the nature of privacy and the moral basis for respecting it in human-to-human relationships. In proposing this account we assume a Kantian stance, accepting as fundamental and absolute our obligation to respect the autonomy of persons.

"Privacy," as some use it, refers to the lack of information which others have about one. Accordingly, the less information others have about an individual the more privacy that individual has. But this understanding of privacy makes the notion of violating another's privacy difficult to understand. We do not violate a friend's privacy by knowing great numbers of intimate details she freely reveals to us; we do violate her privacy if instead we learn those same details from surreptitiously reading her diary. In its important moral sense "privacy" refers to our ability to control others' access to information about us, to the intimacies of our lives, to our thoughts, and to our bodies.[5]

Of course, complete control seems impossible since any public contact may inadvertently reveal information. For example, a student may only intend to reveal a set of facts about his failed romantic relationship while, from both the facts and body language, the teacher accurately surmises a history of family problems and psychological trauma. What is important nonetheless is that individuals retain control over when, where and to whom they make explicit self-revelations and over the conditions under which they put themselves in a position which risks inadvertently providing information. The student in the above example chose to risk a personal conversation with the teacher.

We respect others' privacy, then, by allowing them to choose the circumstances in which they do or do not make or risk self-revelation. Respecting the autonomy of others also has to do with respecting their choices, and so a very important connection between respecting privacy and respecting autonomy is immediately apparent.

We are morally obligated to respect the autonomy of persons. Respecting another's autonomy does not require that we let her do whatever she desires. It does require that we not do to her whatever we desire irrespective of her preferences, aims and intentions. We must allow her choices, especially her well-informed decisions, to be centrally determinative of what happens to

her. In other words, that she chooses *X* is a prima facie reason for our allowing her to do *X* and the fact that her doing *X* interferes with our plans or even the plans of the majority is not a morally sufficient reason for denying her the opportunity to do *X*. That *X* is morally wrong and fails to show respect for the chooser's own autonomy or the autonomy of others is a morally sufficient reason for such a denial. That a person does not want us to observe his body, know his history or read his thoughts is a prima facie moral reason for not doing these things. Respecting privacy, in other words, is a prima facie duty derived from our fundamental duty to respect the autonomy of persons. Yet it may conflict with and be overridden by some other prima facie obligation also derived from our obligation to respect autonomy.

What does this conclusion regarding humans imply regarding God? Added to the assumptions stated above regarding human and divine goodness, this analysis of the moral value of privacy makes an initially strong case for the position that God shows prima facie regard for our privacy by allowing us to choose whether and when to make self-disclosure before God. Above we assumed that a proper understanding of moral principles binding upon humans reveals also the character of divine activity towards humans either because it discloses like duties for God or because it describes moral value actualized by unobliged divine benevolence. On the "duty model," the above moral analysis of privacy gives a very strong case for the view that God acknowledges a divine prima facie moral duty to respect an individual's choice not to disclose information to God. On the "benevolence model," the analysis of privacy gives initially very strong reasons for believing that God, out of freely chosen goodness, would require of Godself overriding reasons to violate an individual's choice against self-disclosure. For the sake of simplicity, we refer to both of these versions as the position that God shows prima facie regard for our privacy.

Our initial argument regarding God and privacy has been that a strong case can be made for God's prima facie regard for our privacy, based on the assumed view of divine goodness along with the derivation of a prima facie duty to respect privacy from an absolute duty to respect autonomy. This gives us only a prima facie regard for privacy because there may be circumstances in which God's respecting an individual's privacy would conflict with some other more stringent duty or more benevolent act also derived from God's duty or benevolent intention to respect autonomy. In this essay we will not investigate what other possibly conflicting duties might be involved, or what would count as a morally sufficient reason for God not to respect an individual's choice not to bring an idea, judgement, or feeling before God's purview. Rather we shall explore and defend the initial argument for a strong case for God's prima facie regard of human privacy. We do so by examining a set of possible objections.

(2)

We foresee three basic ways to challenge our initial argument. The first two objections have in common the claim that despite the earlier assumption regarding the likeness of human morality and divine activity, there just are reasons in this case to deny the connection. The first argument along these lines—objection (A), we will call it—would challenge our initial argument on the ground that *God's nature* is such that, unlike humans, God can respect our autonomy without respecting our privacy. The second—that is objection (B)—would be that perhaps *God's authority* over us is such that, unlike fellow humans, God is neither obligated nor benevolently determined to respect out autonomy, and thus morally need not have prima facie regard for our privacy. The third objection—(C)—would be to marshall such compelling reasons to believe that God does, or ought to (in some sense other than that held by the initial argument), know the inner recesses of human thought that this initial case to the contrary is overridden.

In the remainder of this section and in section (3) we offer a response to objection (A) and a three-part response to objection (B). In section (4) we answer objection (C). We maintain that our responses to these criticisms ultimately build a cumulative argument that strengthens the initial argument for God's respect for privacy.

Objection A. Our initial argument maintains that respect for autonomy requires prima facie regard for privacy. Yet, it might be objected that the connection between autonomy and privacy in human affairs is due to the corrupted nature of the creature which the Creator does not share. Our fellow humans may trick us, keeping us uncertain of whether we are observed. They may delight in abusing their knowledge about us; or they might intend to use it well but lack the power or the knowledge to do so. For all these reasons, human disrespect for privacy does threaten our ability to control our lives in accordance with our choices. But, the objection continues, God's perfection protects us from imagined misuse or abuse of divine knowledge about us. God's omnibenevolence, omnipotence, and omniscience all mean that we need not fear the malevolent use or bumbling abuse of our secrets. Additionally, God's omnipresence means that we are not in doubt as to when God observes, namely always.

Reply to (A). We agree that the possible abuse of personal information is a good reason to fear human disregard for privacy but not orthodox divine omniscience. But the initial argument deriving respect for privacy from respect for autonomy did not depend on any contingent claims regarding what happens when information about us is abused either accidentally or intentionally. The argument is rather that failure to respect an individual's choice to withhold information about herself is, in and of itself, a failure to respect her autonomy unless there are intervening morally relevant factors. Therefore,

the impossibility that an all-good, all-knowing, all-powerful God will misuse knowledge about us, does not make the moral duty to respect privacy any less applicable to God.

God's omnipresence and the certainty of divine observation as compared to uncertainty in the human case also would not make God's disregard for our choice of privacy any less a disregard for our autonomy. For, it is not the covert nature of a violation of privacy which makes if morally blameworthy. That Winston, in Orwell's *1984*, could trust the "Thought Police" to watch and win in the end makes their access to his mind no less a violation of his privacy or his autonomy. Again, it is the disruption of choice itself, not its covert or overt nature, that makes the disregard for privacy prima facie a violation of our autonomy and thus, in the absence of morally overriding factors, morally wrong.[6]

Objection (B). The first objection to our initial argument that there is a connection between God's respect for autonomy and divine prima facie respect for privacy fails. A second line of attack would grant this connection but deny that God has morally compelling grounds for respecting autonomy such as bind our fellow humans. As an explanation for humans' obligation to respect each others' autonomy the objector might claim that human-to-human, each individual is her own proper moral authority only because every human is morally fallible, and no adult human has a natural, uncontested authority over another. Rather, authority must be gained through "freely" entered into relationships such as citizen/state or teacher/student. God, by comparison, is morally infallible, asking of us only what is truly good, and has an uncontestable relationship to us as our Creator. As a result, his objection concludes, God has ultimate moral authority over us and our God-given autonomy does not morally bind the divine nor compel divine respect.

Reply to (B)-part (i). We agree that God, considered abstractly as the all-morally-wise creator, need not be seen as one who must respect our autonomy. In reply we will not attempt to deal with every aspect of the complex issue of God and human autonomy. Our argument is that this abstract consideration of the issue overlooks the connection between respecting autonomy and respecting the *conditions for becoming* an autonomous person. The purposes for us which we presumed above to be God-given show God's interest in our becoming autonomous in at least the limited sense of our becoming morally accountable beings of a certain kind. Our reply to (B), therefore, will be that divine respect for privacy is necessary for us to *become* the autonomous persons required by God's purposes.

We, and most theists who posit God's creation of significantly free humans, believe that God intends us to use our freedom to become responsible moral agents capable of relationships of love and trust with others and with God. Furthermore, God not only intends this for us but holds us accountable for

becoming such. Granted God's moral authority over us, what if it is further the case that we cannot become the kind of creatures God intends and holds us accountable for becoming unless God respects our autonomy and privacy? It then would follow, we believe, that for both moral and nonmoral reasons God must show prima facie regard for human privacy. If divine respect for privacy proves necessary for our becoming morally accountable beings who can enter relationships of trust and love, a God who does not respect privacy acts inconsistently, frustrating God's own purposes, and is morally flawed, holding accountable creatures who, by God's own doing, cannot become what they are commanded to become. Such a God would not be a maximally perfect being.

We think the case for this connection between the supposed divine purpose and divine respect for privacy is strong and we shall make it by first considering in section (3), part (ii) of our reply to (B), the detrimental effects which *human* disregard for privacy has on moral development and on trust and intimacy, crucial components of love. We then argue in (3), rely to (B)-part (iii), that *divine* disregard for human privacy would be likely to have similar detrimental effects and hence would be subject to the moral criticism that God holds us accountable for what God makes it impossible for us to achieve. If sound, our reasoning overturns the objection based on God's moral authority over us.

3

Reply to (B)-part (ii). The literature on the moral significance of privacy identifies effects which a lack of respect for privacy has on individuals' ability to develop their capacities for responsible moral agency and for relationships of trust and intimacy. In so far as these capacities are central to personhood, the literature argues, then respect for privacy is necessary for meeting our moral obligation to respect persons. In this part of section (3) we use insights from this literature to show that in order to become responsible moral agents and trusting, loving persons, we need to be able to count on our fellow human beings to respect our privacy, i.e., to show prima facie regard for our desire not to reveal ourselves in particular ways in particular circumstances to particular or all fellow humans. In (B)-part (iii) we investigate to what extent this conclusion also extends to relationships with the divine.

Responsible agents must first and foremost be capable of holding themselves accountable for doing what is right and good; they must recognize others as having moral claims against them and themselves as having moral claims against others. This complex ability requires a certain conception of the self, a conception of the self with which we are not born and do not necessarily develop or maintain. If forever treated as mere dependents, slaves

or tools of other humans' will and satisfaction, it is extremely difficult to think of ourselves as responsible agents or as people who can rightfully demand that certain things not be done to us or to others.

Of course, coercion or general disregard for a person's preferences—in the absence of morally sufficient reasons for doing so—is a form of treating that person as our tool and, for the moment at least, as our "slave" and not as a rightfully independent self, or person. But this is the case to an extraordinary degree when the choice ignored or overridden is the individual's choice to maintain privacy. For by violating (for no moral reason) his claim against our intrusion into what he took to be uniquely his domain, we deny that he is his own person, possessing a special relationship to his own thoughts, feelings or personal history.

It is for this reason that Jeffrey Reiman has correctly spoken of respect for privacy as a "social ritual by means of which an individual's moral title to his existence is conferred."[7] Reiman writes that "moral ownership in the full sense requires the social ritual of privacy" because a sense of moral entitlement to oneself does not develop unless we are treated as uniquely "entitled to determine when and by whom [our] concrete reality is experienced," when and to whom the "contents of [our] consciousness" are revealed, and respect for privacy simply is this practice of treating individuals as uniquely entitled in just this way.[8]

Without participating in a social setting which acknowledges a moral claim to privacy, the individual cannot come to see herself as the moral proprietor and governor of her body, thoughts, feelings, and decisions, and therefore she will not learn to be responsible for them nor to claim moral respect for them. She will not, that is, conceive of herself as the sort of being who can hold herself and others morally accountable.

Besides having this ability for accountability, responsible moral agents must know what it is to seek and do the good because, upon moral reflection, they themselves judge it to be good. To develop this moral talent likewise requires a private sphere in which we can practice thinking for ourselves. If every piece of moral reflection were immediately reviewed by those whose approval we desire or condemnation we fear, very few of us would learn to evaluate ideas or actions according to any standard other than what is useful or agreeable. As Edward Bloustein affirms, without relief from public scrutiny of thoughts and deeds, one's "opinions, being public, tend never to be different; [one's] aspirations, being known, tend always to be conventionally accepted ones."[9]

Probably no other capacities are as fundamental to moral agency as the ability to hold oneself and others accountable and the ability to do the good because one has oneself judged it good. But out of these capacities grow other abilities for relationships proper to mature moral agents. Trust and intimacy seem particularly to require human respect for privacy.

Speaking very generally, we can say that trusting someone always involves the conviction that she will follow through with some piece of behavior (in thought or deed) which we have tacitly or explicitly asked of her, or which we have given her some reason to think she should do in relation to us. Note that we can correctly be said to have trusted someone to perform a particular act right before our eyes as when, for example, we trust a conversation partner not to lie to us. We also can correctly be said to trust someone whose actions we do not observe as when, for example, we trust a friend not to reveal our vulnerabilities to those who wish us ill-will. But trusting someone nonetheless means that we anticipate their carrying through with the behavior, whether or not we are able to detect and to hold them accountable for a breach of our trust. If, therefore, we say that we trust our friend not to aid those who wish us ill but we nonetheless insist on monitoring her every conversation, the friend could rightly complain that we do not trust her after all.

Trusting, then, always involves the conviction that the person will act the way we have agreed (tacitly or explicitly) he will act in relation to us regardless of whether we are present to enforce our agreement. This being the case, to become worthy of trust we must become the sort of person who can do what we have agreed to do whether or not someone is there to see that we do it "or else." Now, as Charles Fried has pointed out, someone who knows he is under constant surveillance never has the opportunity to discover whether he is in fact trustworthy in this way. Having always had the presence of the authority to keep him in line, he never learns the discipline nor knows he is capable of gaining the discipline to perform his duty when no one is watching. As a consequence, surmises Fried, he also cannot learn to trust others. For if he has never experienced being worthy of another's trust he has no basis for thinking others are worthy of his.[10] Without trust, of course, intimacy is also impossible.

There are also more direct connections between respect for privacy and the ability for intimate friendships. Imagine either a world in which all automatically know each others' histories, thoughts and feelings or one in which each has a right to know such about the other. Either imagined world seems to us devoid of the possibility of intimate relationships anything like the sort we know in the world as we have it. We draw this conclusion from observations of what appear to be fundamental components of intimacy as humans partake of it.

Our primary observation is that intimacy seems always to involve at its core a mutual voluntary gift of self. Yet, I can give myself to another only if I have a self to give; that is, if I do not first recognize myself as responsibly and rightfully independent of the other, then I cannot conceive of myself as freely offering myself to the other. And as we noted above, the development and maintenance of such a sense of self requires a social structure which

recognizes a right to privacy. The significance of this background right also lies in this: the beloved's gift of self by disclosure of personal facts and private thoughts comes to one as something to which one has no initial right; yet this is impossible if our social setting does not recognize a general right to limit access to personal information.

Of course, the gift of self may take forms other than intentional self-disclosure. Yet, a crucial form in which it is expressed is the voluntary disclosure and exchange of stories about who we are, have been and hope to be. No doubt this is in part because intimate relationships are relationships of choice—we want and choose to be known by the other. But note that this is not all that is operating in the significance of voluntary disclosure. For it does not seem to be enough to have retrospective choice, that is, to be glad that our friend knows what others told her. Intimacy appears to occur and flourish in the telling of what the other recognizes as ours and ours alone to tell—a situation, it should be noted, which makes our gift of self really a creation of self in the telling of who we understand ourselves to have been and be. The worlds without privacy which we asked the reader to imagine would make such a point of view impossible. Therefore, without denying that confession of what one knows the other already knows can be charged with significance and spur intimacy, we conclude that the features we have described and which we locate at the core of the human experience of intimacy require the possibility of privacy.[11]

If the above analyses and observations are correct, then at least among fellow human beings, respect for privacy is one of the conditions necessary for the possibility of becoming responsible moral agents capable of trusting and intimate relationships. God, we are assuming, asks that we become responsible and loving agents. Is divine respect for privacy also necessary for attaining this end? If we fail to act towards God as a creator who respects our autonomy and privacy, can we achieve this end of mature moral and personal development which we assume God wants and asks us to become?

Reply to (B)-part (iii). Without presuming to settle this question indefeasibly, we will build a strong case for the affirmative by digging out what is at stake in the God-human relationship regarding each of the above discussed aspects of mature moral agency. We take them in reverse order.

Intimacy. We have said that fundamental features of intimacy among humans depend upon our having the right and opportunity to withhold information about ourselves. God's knowing all that is true about us would not deprive us of the opportunity for spontaneous, fresh self-revelation to a fellow human.[12] Would relating to God as One who knows innermost thoughts without our telling and against our will prevent intimacy with God? We argued above that our capacity for intimacy requires also a capacity for trust and a sense of responsible selfhood and that both of these are linked to our fellow

humans' respect for privacy. Thus, a full discussion of intimacy and God awaits our discussion of these other aspects of mature moral agency. But it is worth our while to consider what consequences for intimacy with God follow from the other features of human intimacy examined above.

We argued that fundamental components of the experience of human intimacy require privacy because it allows a voluntary, self-determined giving of one's historical, psychological and philosophical story. It follows from this that if confessing before God what God already knows is all that is possible, then intimacy with God *of a sort comparable to what we know through human interaction* is not possible. Might our relationship with God still be called "intimate"? Perhaps in a very attenuated application of the term, yes. But as long as our relationship to God lacks truly free and self-determining self-disclosure, then the sense in which that relationship is "intimate" has only a rather distant analogy to what that term means when we apply it to our experience with one another.

Thus, while our analysis of intimacy, self-disclosure, and privacy does not show that intimacy with God is conceptually impossible unless we conceive of God as respecting our privacy, we believe it does show that if there is intimacy with a non-self-limiting omniscient God, it is intimacy of a different order than that known through human interaction. Anyone wishing to argue for the view that humans can achieve intimacy with a God who does not respect privacy needs to give an account of what characterizes this intimacy and what qualifies it as such in the absence of a quality that functions so crucially in human intimacy, namely voluntary self-disclosure. And even if this can be done, such an account must also deal with whether and how human intimacy can be a place for growing into a quite different kind of intimacy with God, since theists often assume that the one is preparation for the other.

Trust. Intimacy, we said earlier, is inconceivable without trust. Regarding trust we have said that people learn to be worthy of trust by being trusted such that they develop the self-mastery to act as they have been asked to act, even though those who trust them would never know of their betrayal. If we act towards God as the moral author and judge who "sees" and "hears" all things, then it would seem impossible for us to learn either that God trusts us or that we are worthy of God's trust. To become worthy of trust I must be able to recognize my situation as one in which I have been trusted. If we think God observes our every thought, then we do not know that God has ever trusted us or that we have ever met the test of God's trust.

It might be argued against us that God does not need to be able to trust humans since God need never be absent. That is, perhaps trust is a virtue only among finite creatures. This defense of omniscience, however, takes the disanalogy between human interaction and our interaction with God a further and even more problematic step. As did the defense of intimacy with God

without privacy, this dismissal of divine trust raises the query how our human relationships can teach us about love of God. Even more perplexing, however, is the obscurity it casts on how God's treatment of us can be a model for our treatment of fellow humans. To say that trust is a virtue only among the spatio-temporally limited, or that God's omnipresence rather than trust is the appropriate model for relationships, suggests that improved use of surveillance techniques is as morally worthy a strategy as nurturing trust—a particularly dubious conclusion if we wish to affirm trust in God's love as a fundamental religious virtue.

Independent thought. Undergirding trust as trust undergirded intimacy is our ability to think, decide and act independently of pressures, threats and goads; that is, the ability to make our own reasoned judgment about what is good and to do that which we judge good because we do so judge it. We said above that human influences and temptations are such that to develop this nascent ability most of us need an opportunity away from others' observation and judgment. We need human respect for our privacy in order to value and encourage within ourselves autonomous moral reflection. Is this true in our relationship with God as well? A strong reason for answering in the affirmative is that independent moral thought that leaves no stone unturned must conceive the possibility that even the most repugnant ideas are true. This suggests that what is finally unthinkable before God must be open to exploration, and consideration of the unthinkable is bound to come more easily under a conception of God as listening only when asked.

A possible response to this argument might be that the required openness to considering repulsive ideas might flourish just as well under a conception of God as an omniscient but forgiving moral judge who values our process of reasoning as much as right conclusions. Such a God could be trusted to tolerate—maybe appreciate, maybe even enjoy—mistakes and repugnancies in the effort to think creatively, honestly, thoroughly and clearly. If we act towards God as One who has at least this kind of desire and respect for our autonomy, perhaps we need not also view God as respecting the privacy of our reasoning for the sake of this third aspect of mature moral agency. But then the puzzle is this: if God values our process of reasoning and is wholly prepared to forgive us when we err, why would God monitor it in the first place?

Our position regarding this third aspect of moral agency then, is that there is an originally strong argument that a God who intends us to become agents capable of independent moral reflection will not monitor our every belief. This argument appears initially to be offset by the view of God as One who highly values our normative and intellectual search and who is both immensely tolerant and well-prepared to forgive. This rebuttal we believe does show convincingly that God *need* not respect privacy in order to allow us to

become independent thinkers, but at the same time it undercuts a major reason we might otherwise have for maintaining that God does monitor our thoughts and beliefs without our consent. This is because, if we believe that God so desires and values our process of autonomous reflection that mistakes and repugnancies are morally inconsequential before God, then what reason do we further have for thinking God would monitor our thoughts without invitation? Although God could respect our independent judgment and not our privacy, if God does respect our independent judgment then the reason for God not to respect our privacy is obscure.

A morally accountable self. Above we said that being the experiencer of particular thoughts and feelings is not sufficient for understanding the contents of one's consciousness as belonging to one in a moral sense. In order to think of myself as responsible for what I think, feel, and do, and in order to think of my thoughts, feelings, and decisions as worthy of others' moral respect, I must view the contents of my consciousness as something which I uniquely own and govern. This ownership of self is known in the power to exert control over others' access to my consciousness, and this is possible only where rituals of respect for privacy are generally accepted. The major question for us, then, is whether God's lack of a prima facie regard for privacy would likewise deprive us of the opportunity of growing into a sense of moral self-ownership.

Let us imagine being aware from our earliest moment that God is "listening" to our unvoiced speculations and day dreams, whether or not we consent to that divine presence. This would be to live in full and unbroken acknowledgement that our private mullings may be unwanted performances and, therefore, that the content of our consciousness is not uniquely ours. By right of access, it belongs as well to an Other. As a result, the sense of unique responsibility for one's thoughts which one might otherwise develop is severely attenuated; the opportunity to take possession of oneself, so to speak, is nullified. It is very doubtful that out of such a weakened sense of responsibility or self-possession there could come an agent who accepts full responsibility for her beliefs and actions and recognizes fellow humans as likewise accountable. Furthermore, we have said above that this sense of responsible selfhood undergirds our ability to act upon autonomous moral reflection, to trust and be trustworthy, and to enter intimate relationships. Therefore, the significant doubt cast upon our ability to become selves if God does not respect our privacy strengthens our case that these other abilities require privacy before God.

Our conclusion regarding selfhood and divine respect for privacy has been derived by imagining what it would be like to always live as if God "heard" all, whether we consented or not. To this conclusion it could be objected that this is not the actual situation in which we find ourselves. The typical sin-

ner—that is, almost any one of us—lives as though God is not present, even if God does not respect her privacy. Thus, isn't it enough, the challenge would go, that God has made us such that we can ignore God's presence and complete knowledge of us; for by allowing us an illusion of privacy, God provides the condition we need to develop a sense of autonomous selfhood.

A little reflection shows, we think, that this proposed rebuttal to our position describes a situation God could not bring about. For on this hypothesis it follows that the person who is ignorant of God's knowledge of the private, or who has the false belief that God does not have such knowledge, is in a position to fulfill God's purpose and command to attain autonomous selfhood, while one with knowledge of the truth is not. But, surely, a morally perfect being would not make it the case that knowledge of the truth would prevent fulfillment of that being's purpose for us.

Note well that our objection is to conceiving God as offering us no choice regarding self-disclosure and not against striving for the spiritual depth to place heart and mind constantly before God. A responsible self's voluntary decision to welcome God into every moment of his thinking is not only conceptually possible, it is perhaps the highest ideal of the religious life. Far from detracting from this traditional ideal our argument underscores it. This is so because once one conceives of God as One who respects privacy, the choice to share one's innermost self with God becomes more significant than ever.

Reply to (B)—summary. In this section we examined, by comparison with human disregard for privacy, the detrimental effects which divine disregard for privacy can be expected to have on our ability to become the sort of beings who have a sense of the moral accountability for ourselves and others and who can enter relationships of trust and intimacy. We have concluded that, despite a degree of difference between the experience and development of these capacities in interaction with humans and their experience and development in interaction with God, the balance of considerations falls on the side of a need for divine respect for privacy. Therefore, in so far as we conceive of God as wanting and commanding us to become mature moral agents, we must think of God as having a prima facie moral regard for our privacy. This is the case even if, as objection (B) claims, the authority God possesses as creator would initially seem to alleviate God of any responsibility to respect our autonomy. The God who has not merely created us, but specifically created us for mature moral agency and has commanded us to fulfill that purpose, could not morally make it impossible for us to fulfill that commandment.

4

Reply to (C). A third way of defeating the claim that God ought to respect our privacy and/or will do so as a condition of realizing the divine purpose

for us is to mount an overriding case for divine omniscience not limited in the way we propose.

The obvious conceptual consideration in this regard is God's perfection and worthiness for worship. Knowledge is a great-making quality and God necessarily possesses the maximal instance of it. Thus, to our proposal, one might object that an individual ignorant of our private concerns cannot be God, and cannot, therefore, be that perfect being who alone is worthy of worship. Our response is equally obvious. Surely the judgment about maximal perfection is an overall one, a judgment which takes account of all the attributes of a perfect being. And if perfect goodness dictates that there are things such a being could know if it were morally appropriate, but necessarily will not know if it is wrong to do so, then the scope of omniscience will be consistent with divine goodness.[13]

Nor do we think we have impugned the majesty and worshipfulness of God by setting limits to divine omniscience. A being who fails to show respect where respect is due is neither majestic nor worthy of worship. It would seem that the burden of proof rests with our position, but if it has been persuasively argued, then it represents no threat to the majesty and worshipfulness of God.

A second kind of objection in an overriding case against divine respect for privacy concerns features of God's overall purpose for us with which we agree and which, on the face of it, *require* divine knowledge of the private sphere of our life. Traditionally, God is providentially active in forming our characters and will judge the outcome with perfect justice. But how can God do the former without error unless God knows fully what we are like and thus what effect on our character events are likely to have? And how can God judge with perfect justice and yet fail to have all relevant information about us?

These matters are not, of course, easy to decide. Our answers to both have a similar form. Surely, among the effects of events upon us with which God is concerned will be that of how uninvited divine knowledge of us affects our moral development and our capacity for trust and intimacy. Assuming that these things are central to God's purpose for us and that our reasoning about the role of privacy in their development is correct, then God will providentially interact with us accordingly, guided by an errorless but self-limited knowledge.

Similarly with God's judgment. We have argued that divine respect for privacy is plausibly a necessary condition of our development as moral agents. God cannot hold us accountable while violating the conditions which make possible our capacity for moral responsibility. Whatever the mode of God's perfect justice, it must be consistent with the conditions necessary for holding us accountable in the first place.[14]

Finally there are matters of religious practice, as well as psychological and religious considerations, which seem at first to weigh against the view of God we are proposing. The most important, perhaps, is that among human desires arguably the deepest and most religiously significant is the desire for unconditional acceptance. But does not God's unconditional love require the belief that God knows all there is to know about us? Our response is that belief in God's unconditional love is a conviction to be held with absolute trust, and if we cannot realize our capacity for trust apart from divine respect for privacy, then God will not undercut the condition required to develop that capacity. We show our trust in the divine promise of unconditional love precisely in revealing to God those matters we deem private.

In this connection, we should underscore a point made above, namely, that on the view we propose the highest ideal of the religious life might be seen as the responsible self's free choice of God's presence in every moment of her thinking. It might be argued, to the contrary, that the religious life's ideal of complete self-knowledge before God could only be formulated and motivated by recognizing that we are already known perfectly by God. God's perfect knowledge of us, on this alternative view, would serve as a continuous invitation and challenge to overcome our fragmentary and distorted self-knowledge. The ideal is to come to know ourselves as we are known by God.

This alternative ideal is plausible. However, it overlooks the fact that in matters of privacy, our struggle is over whether we will reveal to others what we know, or think we know, about ourselves. In developing intimate human relationships, our struggle for self-knowledge is focussed on the *choice* of what we will and will not disclose to the other. Why do we hide (or reveal) this fact about ourselves and not that one? Surely the drama and significance which such choices hold for self-knowledge would be heightened all the more in the presence of an Other whom we trust to love us unconditionally.

Indeed, we suggest that there is much in this view which is religiously attractive. A conception of God's relationship to us which makes a virtue of human autonomy and dignity is, to moderns at least, bound to seem preferable to one which requires compromise of a cherished value. The ancient conundrum associated with prayer—why pray when God knows already the secrets of our hearts?—is dispelled with the view that, in part, prayer is genuine disclosure of that which God would not otherwise know. And a theology which can argue analogously from interpersonal matters, knowledge about which we have confidence, to the character of our relationship to a personal God, is to be preferred, we think, to an austere agnosticism which leaves religious belief and practice shrouded in obscurity.

5

The idea of God as one who respects our privacy, we realize, does not fit

well with theistic tradition and its devotional practice. As we have reflected on the matter, however, we have come to think that a strong case can be made for thinking about God in this way, a way which is religiously attractive in a culture which values human autonomy. We have not considered the possibility that God who is obliged or will benevolently choose to respect our privacy will have overriding reasons to know us completely. Such consideration would require a separate essay. But if our reasoning is sound about the connection between privacy and moral accountability, such morally overriding reasons would have to be strong indeed. A God who does not override our significant freedom to do great harm to ourselves and one another seems unlikely to violate our privacy in the name of some greater good.

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NOTES

1. Debate centers on God's knowledge of possibility and future contingents. See, for example, Jonathan L. Kvanvig, *The Possibility of an All-Knowing God* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1986).

2. Richard Creel has argued recently that God has created persons to exercise significant choice for God's kingdom and not its alternative, rather than "to choose him." We disagree, but a minimalist account of divine purpose like Creel's still involves trust in God and we argue below that the development of such trust in God and we argue below that the development of such trust requires divine respect for human privacy. For Creel's reflections on divine purpose, see *Divine Impassibility: An Essay in Philosophical Theology* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986), chapter 8 and *passim*.

3. For the attack on this idea, see Marilyn McCord Adams, "Problems of Evil: More Advice to Christian Philosophers," *Faith and Philosophy*, volume 5, number 2 (April 1988), pp. 121-43.

4. The "duty" model is discussed and defended by Thomas V. Morris, "Duty and Divine Goodness," *The Concept of God* (Oxford University Press, 1987), pp. 107-21.

5. The best of the substantial literature on privacy is collected in *Philosophical Dimensions of Privacy: An Anthology*, ed. Ferdinand David Schoeman (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1984), cited below as Schoeman. In our depiction of privacy as primarily a matter of control, we have taken issue with Mr. Schoeman and sided with Charles Fried. See Schoeman, p. 3, and Fried, "Privacy [a moral analysis]," p. 209, both in Schoeman.

6. A Kantian argument to the contrary could be modeled on that school's standard justifications of punishment. The sate, it is argued, can punish under certain specifiable conditions because having a state that punishes under those conditions is what the individual would will were she willing rationally. Similarly one could argue that human individuals willing rationally would will that the all-good divine being knows their every thought, word, and deed. Therefore, God is morally justified in not respecting privacy.

Note two things about this argument, however. One, the claim that it is rational to will that God know all about us must be defended. Two, does this argument itself not assume a prima facie obligation on the part of God to respect privacy?

7. Jeffrey Reiman, "Privacy, Intimacy and Personhood," in Schoeman, p. 310.

8. Reiman, p. 313.

9. Edward J. Bloustein, "Privacy as an aspect of human dignity: an answer to Dean Prosser," in Schoeman, p. 188. For further supporting reflections see Stanley, I Benn, "Privacy, Freedom, and Respect for Persons," in Schoeman, pp. 241, 242.

10. Fried, pp. 208-9 and 216-7. In fairness we should note that Fried works from a slightly different description of "trust".

11. Yet, intimacy is profoundly experienced on those occasions when our beloved seems to have grasped who we are better than we ourselves. With more time and space we would argue that this effect of "being known" depends in large measure on a background assumption about the private and privileged nature of self-disclosure.

12. A final relevant effect of a world of no privacy would be that all our relationships would be carried out before third parties. This, notes Robert Gerstein, would deprive all friendships of a necessary quality of intimacy: that the relationship is valued for its own sake. Having a third party overtly observing them forces the couple's attention away from the inherent meaning of their act and towards how they appear to another. As a result the intimate quality of the act dissipates as the measure of the activity's worth becomes its usefulness in front of the observer. However, God's presences in all that we do with the beloved does place us in the position of always having to take into account how what we do appears before God and what value it must have from the divine perspective. According to the analysis above, this concern destroys intimacy unless it can coincide with valuing the relationship for its own sake in a way that worrying over how we appear before human observers cannot. Perhaps this coincidence can take place if the intimate partners choose truly to place their relationship before the Creator's eyes. Otherwise, it is not obvious it can. See Robert Gerstein, "Intimacy and Privacy," in Schoeman, p. 268.

13. It might be thought that our view entails the absurd consequence that God knows practically nothing about us or, even worse, the contradictory view that God must first know all our thoughts in order to know which ones we choose to keep private. But we do not accept either charge. As for the first, just as we know or have reasonable beliefs about other human beings based on astute observation of them and attention to what they inadvertently reveal, so God would have the perfect knowledge of each of us in this mode. Furthermore, God would appropriately have omniscient access to all our personal life, except for those things about which we choose to remain private. Intuitively, this seems quite ample enough knowledge of us to enable God to interact with us in such a way that we could come to choose to reveal everything about ourselves. After all, we manage as human beings to interact with one another in such a way as to choose and achieve profoundly intimate relationships with one another. On the second point, as to how God could know what we deem private without first knowing *all* our thoughts, why should we accept this as the only possible account of the mechanism for divine knowledge? Why could not God's will from all eternity be determined not to know what we choose to keep private? Richard Creel's model of God's will as indexed to possibility is a useful one to

envision as a mechanism by which God could respect our privacy. See Creel, *op. cit.*, chapter 2.

14. It may be that the mechanism of divine justice which fits best with our proposal is the notion of self-judgment found in the writings of C.S. Lewis. The unwillingness of the self to open itself to God consigns the self to a life apart from the divine presence with the deserved quality of life which that entails. For Lewis' imaginative portrayal of his view, see *The Great Divorce*, (New York: Macmillan Publishing Co., 1946).

15. We are grateful to Jonathan Stewart, David Hawkins, William P. Alston and two anonymous reviewers for helpful criticisms and suggestions.